

In its February, 2000, issue Outreach, a periodical published in New York by the Armenian Prelacy, printed an article by Professor Vigen Guroian on the Joint Declaration signed by Karekin I and John Paul II in December, 1996, in Rome. Prompted by this article Professor Hagop Nersoyan presents a philosophical defense of the position of the Armenian Church regarding the nature(s) of Jesus Christ. Guroian's article is reproduced below (as is, except for the correction of some obvious typographical errors), followed by Nersoyan's comments.

***The Contemporary Significance of Armenian Christology:
On the Controversy over the Joint Declaration of
Karekin I and John Paul II***

By VIGEN GUROIAN

In a recent article entitled "The Joint Vatican Declaration Contradicts the Christological Tradition of the Armenian Church (*Armenian Reporter Int'l*, April 12, 1997), Rev. Fr. Mesrop Aramian comments that the Armenian Church "is almost at the brink of being detached from its tradition" and that in Armenian life generally "issues of faith ... have become unimportant." No one who truly cares about Armenian religious life and is in the least bit honest about the present condition of the Armenian Church could disagree. This lamentable state of affairs ought to have moved church leaders long ago to bring about genuine reform in the Church and meet Armenians around the world at the level of their lived lives as members of diverse societies requiring different strategies of evangelism, education and pastoral guidance. Likewise, I wholeheartedly agree with Rev. Fr. V. N. Nersessian's comments in his recent letter to the *Armenian Reporter* (May 3, 1997). He writes: "Armenian theology ... needs to bring the value and the insight of its patristic and monastic thought to bear on the reality of life as lived by the contemporary Armenian Orthodox faithful." I believe that these statements invite a much needed discussion about the Armenian Church's theology and contemporary ethical practice. And I also want to suggest that they are quite related to the principal issue at hand. Thus, in my closing remarks I intend to return to these concerns about the practical place of faith in the lives of Armenians.

However, I do not see that much good can come from the criticisms leveled by these same individuals against His Holiness Karekin I for recently having signed a joint declaration with Pope John Paul II. Both have expressed grave misgivings over the Armenian Catholicos's actions because they believe His Holiness has compromised the Armenian Church's historic teaching about who Jesus Christ is. Similarly, I find it incredible and most unfortunate that three Armenian Primates of the Armenian Church have publicly joined this criticism (*Armenian Reporter* April 19, 1997). For years I have conscientiously withheld from becoming engaged in the polemics that appear regularly in the pages of the Armenian weekly newspapers and sadly seem to characterize much of Armenian public speech. But the recent ill-spirited public attacks upon the religious leader of the Armenian Church require some sort of response. And so I am glad also that Archbishop K. Krikorian of Vienna has already submitted a sober rebuttal to the critics (*Armenian Reporter*, April 12, 1997). The Archbishop has laid the essential groundwork for any worthwhile discussion that might follow on this matter.

If Fr. Aramian is correct that vast numbers of Armenians are hardly knowledgeable of the

tenets of their faith—and I believe that he is— then his article and other statements in the same spirit that have appeared of late in the Armenian press are only bound to confuse, mislead or alienate people still more. So I would issue an appeal that we find the appropriate forums wherein these and related matters could be argued and discussed to some constructive end with real benefits that might accrue to the faithful.

In the remarks which follow, I will try to explain to the ordinary reader what seems to be at issue. And while I believe that reasonable persons might disagree about the precise meaning conveyed by the paragraph on the teaching about Christ in the joint statement signed by Karekin I and John Paul II, I am persuaded that the content of the paragraph does not betray Armenian teaching. I also believe that Karekin I was acting well within his prerogative as Catholicos in signing the statement with the contested paragraph in it.

What is At Issue

Stated in the simplest terms, a principal historic reason why the Armenian Church is not in communion with either the Roman Catholic Church or the greater body of so-called Eastern Orthodox (e.g. Greek or Roman) churches is that the Armenian Church has refused to consent to a fifth-century formulation about the Person of Jesus Christ that was agreed to by a great gathering of the universal church at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Armenian Church together with the several other churches that we now refer to as Oriental Orthodox churches, was *at that time* suspicious that this formula logically divided Christ in two and thus jeopardized the ancient scriptural confession of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). How might Christ be described in two? In the first place by carelessly speaking of Jesus acting as a man in certain instances, such as when he hungered, and with his divinity when, for example, he performed miracles.

Armenians detected the influence of just such bifurcated thinking in the definition on the faith of the Council of Chalcedon. They worried that this way of thinking and speaking about Jesus Christ would lead people to believe that the One Lord confessed in Scripture was actually *two beings* who were joined in the physical individual known and seen as Jesus of Nazareth: the human individual gestated in the womb of his mother Mary and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity who came to dwell within that individual during his earthly life. Armenian Christians certainly had reason for concern. Many members of the so-called Chalcedonian party were receiving the words of the council in a spirit that at least bordered on the Nestorian heresy which represented such a belief. They were prone to speaking as if Jesus acted as God in some instances and as a human being in other instances. From the standpoint of Armenian churchmen the definition of Chalcedon did not emphasize sufficiently the essential unity of Christ’s person in his being and in his acts. Christ is one, the Armenians insisted, and he acts as one single being in his divine-human Nature at all times and on every occasion.

In more technical terms, Armenians objected to the “two natures” language adopted by the Council of Chalcedon. This terminology of two natures had been used to explain how Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Christ was composed of both a human nature and a divine nature, said the council. By contrast Armenians adhered strictly to the language and meaning of the first Great Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.). The Nicene Creed that we say at every Divine Liturgy was the product of that council. The Nicene Council had employed the term nature with a very specific intent to connote a concrete existence. Thus God was one being and nature. And the Son was of the same being and nature of the Father. That was how the council

interpreted the words of Christ in the Gospel of John 14:9-10: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” The theologians of Nicaea used nature with a sense analogous to what modern physics means by a solid. Solids, like diamonds or ice cubes, are discrete substances, and cannot be mixed together as can liquids or gases. So when the Chalcedonians spoke of two natures in Christ, Armenians balked. How could Christ be two “solids,” two natures. What sense did it make to speak of these natures as united but not confused and so on, as the definition of Chalcedon prescribed? And if the Chalcedonians were using nature differently to connote something more analogous to a liquid or a gas, nature as a kind of abstract or amorphous essence, new problems arose. A gas or a liquid can be mixed with or emulsified into another gas or liquid. But if nature were being used in this sense, then logically what was to prevent us from saying that Christ had three or four natures— air is made up of not just oxygen and nitrogen but also hydrogen and carbon dioxide and so forth— or, on the other hand, that Christ might himself be yet another unique combined nature neither strictly human nor divine?

Thus Armenians continued to embrace the original language and intent of the Council of Nicaea and rejected the Chalcedonian language of two natures. They would speak of Christ as One Person and Nature of the Divine Word who had become Incarnate, namely a human being. Christ, the eternal Word and Son of the Father, acted (or assumed) full manhood by being born of a woman and participating in all of our human ways, excepting sin, and even dying humanly on the Cross and still he was God.

The Joint Statement in the Present Ecumenical Context

This was the debate in the fifth and sixth centuries. Fifteen hundred years hence on December 13, 1996, His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians, signed a joint statement in Rome with Pope John Paul II in which the two agreed to the following common formulation of who Christians believe Christ is:

They [Karekin I and John Paul II] particularly welcome the great advance that their churches have registered in their common search for unity in Christ, the Word of God made flesh. Perfect God as to his divinity, perfect man as to his humanity, his divinity is united to his humanity in the Person of the Only-begotten Son of God, in a union which is real, without confusion, without alteration, without division, without any separation.

It is to this paragraph that today’s critics object. They say it echoes and indeed repeats for all practical purposes the definition of Chalcedon. They point in particular to the phrasing “in a union which is real, perfect, without confusion, without alteration, without division, without any separation” as the principal offense. They do not point out, however, that the two leaders avoided the use of the term *two natures*, even though Armenians at least since St. Nersess the Graceful have expressed a willingness to embrace that terminology so long as it is understood that this is simply a shorthand way of expressing *in thought* that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine in his single undivided Person. This was an important concession from the Roman Catholic side.

But I think that what most makes the critics’ accusations misleading is their conspicuous inattention to over forty years of discussion between Armenian theologians and theologians of the other so-called Oriental (Monophysite) Orthodox churches and theologians of all churches have

labored to reinterpret the historic patristic debate and the inherited terminology in ways leading to new consensual language that accommodates Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians alike in a common affirmation that we all worship One Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who is wholly God and wholly human.

His Holiness Karekin I participated in these discussions virtually from the start and it cannot be gainsaid that he brought his understanding of these accommodations and clarifications of meaning into his conversations with the Pope and that he and the Pope understood precisely what they needed to say and to avoid saying in the paragraph on christology. But to a fault, I have to say, the critics of the joint statement remain wedded to the fifth and sixth century debate and its linguistic distinctions and limitations. This is a kind of patristic fundamentalism and rigid ahistorical scholasticism that throughout his life Karekin I has avoided for the sake of the unity of the whole church.

Interpreted from a standpoint frozen to the fifth century the language employed in the joint statement might look suspect. But even thirty-five years ago, as strict a defender of the original inspiration of the Armenian christological position as Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan was prepared to go further than Karekin I did in the joint statement. Thirty-five years ago in an article published by the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (an article recently collected by N. V. Nersessian in *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, 1997) Archbishop Nersoyan tendered this opinion:

The Chalcedonian formula has of course come to stay. But the sense in which the formula was taken has fortunately gone. ... The history of the Church, I believe, has worked out the implications under the pressure of common sense ... There still exist in the West people who move in the atmosphere of the real Chalcedon. But I don't think they have much of a chance of survival.

We need not, therefore, quarrel about the terms as long as Chalcedonians really mean what orthodox Monophysites have always meant. I think that out of respect for the incontestably imposing greatness of the Dyophysite [i.e., Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Protestants] section of the Church, Monophysites should take a favorable view of the Chalcedonian formula.

They should do this in the way in which Nerses IV [the Graceful] has done, adhering, however, to the correct meaning of the formula.

In Rome, Karekin I did not go so far as to take all of Nersoyan's advice. As I have said, the wording of the paragraph on christology entirely avoids the two natures terminology and, I would add, it begins with a formulaic bow to the historic Armenian way of expressing the union of humanity and divinity in Christ, echoing the great Father of Orthodox Monophysitism, St. Cyril of Alexandria. The Pope and the Catholicos state that the Christ whom we worship is "the Word of God made flesh, ... his divinity [being] united to his humanity in the Person of the Only-begotten Son of God."

In Rome Karekin I consciously acted within the context of a profound modern ecumenical achievement alluded to by Tiran Nersoyan thirty-five years ago and in the spirit of the greatest of our ecumenical patriarchs, Nerses Shnorhali. Much has happened in the subsequent thirty odd years since Archbishop Nersoyan made his observations and recommendations. For example, the language Karekin I and John Paul II agreed to echoes a recent agreement reached between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox theologians and church representatives in a document

issued in September of 1990. This document, which agreed on some common meanings in the ancient language of our shared faith, consummated a twenty-five year long dialogue. The Joint Commission of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches that met in Geneva called for unity and full communion between their respective churches based upon the kind of common understanding that Archbishop Nersoyan insisted had all but been accomplished thirty-five years ago.

The Commission's statement was signed by representatives of both Etchmiadzin and the Cilician See. All members agreed to say the following which employs the natures language that I have already noted Karekin I and John Paul II conspicuously avoided although they might have used it without offense to either party.

Both families agree that the Hypostasis [concrete personal being] of the Logos became composite by uniting to His divine uncreated nature with its natural will and energy, which He has in common with the Father and the Holy Spirit, created human nature, which is assumed at the Incarnation and is made His own, with its natural will and energy.

Both families agree that the natures with their proper energies and wills are united hypostatically [by the Word who assumed our flesh] and naturally without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation, and that they are distinguished in thought alone.

I know that I have risked stretching the patience of the common reader by introducing these citations which are replete with such technical theological terminology. But even the layman can compare the language cited above with the language agreed to by the Catholicos and the Pope and see that nothing new was added that would significantly distinguish the meaning of their statement from the Statement of the Joint Commission.

I have not addressed the additional charge the critics make that His Holiness Karekin I spoke out of turn in Rome. This seems to me a highly specious argument. The critics maintain that His Holiness ought to have consulted with the other bishops before signing the joint statement. But as witnessed from the comparison above, Karekin I broke no new ground in his joint statement with the Pope that might have warranted such consultation. Furthermore, does anyone seriously suggest that the religious leader of the Armenian Church is prohibited from speaking theologically when meeting or even issuing joint statements about our faith with leaders of other churches? The words of the Catholicos and the Pope have a sure and secure context which transcends the fifth and sixth century christological controversies. That context is the modern ecumenical movement in which new theological and ecclesiological meanings of old concepts have been developed and agreed upon. If Karekin I's critics believe that that movement is fundamentally misbegotten and that Armenians have had no business agreeing to what they have agreed to with representatives of other confessions (and I suppose some of them do) then let them say so outright. Bu they cannot say that the Catholicos has to abide by their sentiments. Let there be renewed discussion but without red herrings cast about. More important, the unseemly public criticism of the Catholicos on this matter by bishops and other clergy needs to end as well as the no less mean-spirited insinuations about Papal motives.

The Meaning of the Debate for Armenian Life Today

I have before me a wire copy of a news piece distributed through the Catholic News Service entitled "Nun-Physician Cites Major Health Care Problems in Armenia." It was sent to me

by the editor of a major Catholic weekly; and he passed it on to me because he is genuinely concerned about the Armenian people and the Armenian Church. You see, he is married to an Armenian woman and he frequently attends the Armenian Church.

This article reports the observations of Sr. Rosenthal, a Sister of Charity from Cincinnati, who recently visited hospitals and medical facilities in Armenia and Georgia. She spent a year in Armenia, August 1995 through August 1996. What she witnessed was nothing less than horrid as regards hospital conditions and health care generally. However, I am raising up for consideration only two of her statements. The text in which they appear reads as follows:

She [Sister Rosenthal] said one of the things she found most striking was the extent to which abortion is practiced in Armenia as virtually the only method of birth control.

"It's not uncommon to find women still in their birth-bearing years who have had 40 abortions," she said. "The conditions under which these are performed are largely unsanitary and in many rural areas they are done without anesthesia. ... Women with post-operative complications are largely ignored," she said.

If a baby is born with a handicap, infanticide is not uncommon, she said. She related a conversation with an Armenian doctor who wanted to talk about healthy babies because with handicapped infants, "only an hour or two and the problem's all over with."

When she pressed him on what he meant by "all over with," he matter-of-factly told her, "We give an injection. An hour or two later the problem is over with."

I think that these practices reported by Sr. Rosenthal are connected with the impoverished state of Armenian Christianity referred to by Fr. Mesrop Aramian in the passage I cited at the start. I also think Fr. Nersessian's remark that the ancient teaching of the Church needs to be made to speak to the lives of contemporary people is relevant. For if Armenians believed in the Church's teaching about Christ to which these two writers come to such an impassioned defense the horrendous practices of nearly obligatory abortion and routine infanticide in Armenia could not occur as they do presently and are happening as I write.

For the moment let us consider this question: "How much practical difference is the Church's christology making in Armenian life regarding attitudes and behavior toward abortion and infanticide?" Chalcedonian and Monophysite teachings both affirm in explicit and implicit ways that our Savior was born of a human mother who would not have thought of having the young child in her womb aborted. Now consider the extraordinary pressure Mary would face to have an abortion were she a young woman in Armenia today (a non-Chalcedonian country) and how little the Armenian Church has said or done to prevent what is going on. Then consider the strong position the Roman Catholic Church (of Chalcedonian conviction) has taken against abortion, infanticide and, most recently, physician-assisted suicide. I wonder which church is looked upon with more favor by our Risen Lord and His Holy Mother.

I am not dismissing the vital importance of what theologians call the soteriological (salvational) truth which is at stake in the historic debate over the relation of Christ's divinity and humanity. I personally believe that the Armenian Christology holds fast to a vital aspect of Christian faith that became muted in the theologies of many of the churches over the centuries. However, I do wonder how come we have heard such passionate denunciations from bishops and

priests of the Armenian Church about the wording of a brief paragraph on christological teaching when they have not responded with similar outrage to the destruction of innocent young lives and the profound psychological, spiritual and physical harm being done to women in Armenia today. They would do better to begin to explain to the faithful the deep connection between our christological teaching and the Church's ethics. This would be a positive response to legitimate concerns about the condition of belief in the Armenian Church. Does not the epidemic of abortion and infanticide indicate something profoundly troublesome about the beliefs and values which actually dominate in Armenian life? Is not the truth of our faith in the gravest danger because of a failure of belief, religious instruction and moral courage, notwithstanding anything said or signed by the Catholicos in Rome? Opportunities exist to instruct our people by word and deed about the fundamental meaning of faith for their lives, but at present those opportunities are being squandered everywhere.

In light of all this, I would not blame ordinary persons who have followed this debate if they were to ask why there has been such a furor over a paragraph in a statement that they have not seen nor much care about. If these same readers should think this is all wasted breath, like debating over how many angels are able to dance on the head of a pin, I would not fault them for that opinion either. What existential meaning does the Church's christology doctrine really obtain in contemporary Armenian life? The truthful answer is *scarce little*. The Armenian teaching about Christ, the Son of God who has suffered with us has profound potential for pastoral care. This is an age in which theologians of other churches have been rediscovering the ancient theology of a crucified God with its deep roots in our own tradition. Among brilliant Western theologians of so-called Chalcedonian churches the sources of our tradition have been taken seriously and creatively appropriated. The names of Hans Urs von Balthasar (a Roman Catholic) and Jurgen Moltmann (a Protestant) are the most notable. But for many Armenians this christology remains remote. It is as removed from their daily lives as the gold and silver Armenian crosses in museums. It has not been employed pastorally to help the aggrieved and the angered get over the genocide or deal with personal losses in the Azeri pogroms and the earthquake of 1988. This is the fault of bishops and priests, but especially the bishops. The buck cannot be passed.

I am afraid the wrong battleground has been picked once again— unless, perhaps, the criticisms that have been issued of late are really motivated by ecclesiastical politics and the desire to maintain a precious ethno-religious identity and not about faith. In the meantime, "Rachel is weeping for her children and refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." (Jeremiah 31:15).
